



\$3.99 • A

THE TRANSFORMERS SPOTLIGHT



Hot Rod



If there's a line, he'll cross it; if there's a knot, he'll cut it; if there's a risk, he'll take it... smiling. In his solitary world, there's no room for second thoughts, no margin for error. "Out there" is a permanent state of mind, and the more impossible, downright insane the mission, the better this daredevil AUTOBOT likes it. His name...

... IS HOT ROD.



THE TRANSFORMERS: SPOTLIGHT **HOT ROD**

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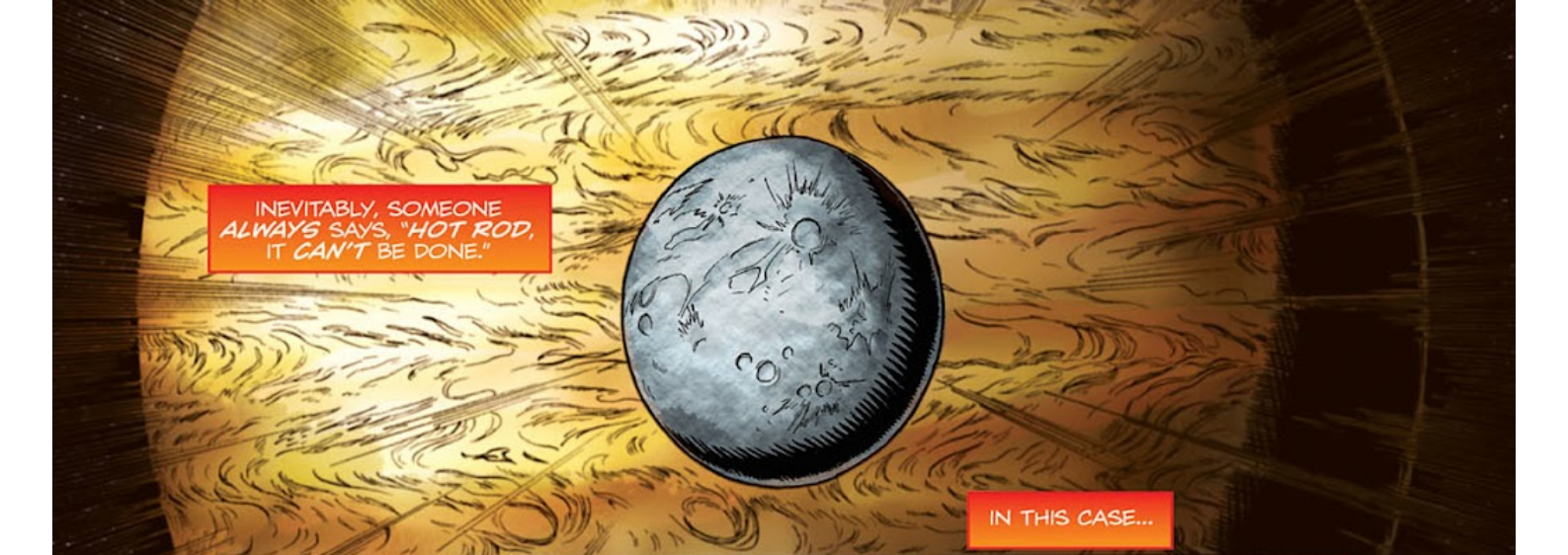
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INEVITABLY, SOMEONE
ALWAYS SAYS, "HOT ROD,
IT CAN'T BE DONE."

IN THIS CASE...



...THERE'S NO WAY I SHOULD BE
ABLE TO MAKE IT DOWN TO THE
SURFACE OF THIS PARTICULAR
MOON WITHOUT BEING DETECTED
AND SHOT OUT OF THE SKY!



BUT IN MY BOOK, THERE'S
NO "CAN'T BE DONE."
THERE'S ALWAYS A WAY...

AND THE MORE
DOWNRIGHT *INSANE*
IT SEEMS...



...THE LESS ANYONE
WILL BE *EXPECTING* IT!



LEAVING MY "RIDE" TO IMPACT ON THE SURFACE, I **FREEFALL**, ALL BUT THE MOST ESSENTIAL SYSTEMS OFFLINE, JUST ANOTHER BIT OF SPACE DEBRIS.

I'M OUT ON MY OWN, UP AGAINST **IMPOSSIBLE** ODDS, MY LIFE—AND MY LIFE ALONE—ON THE LINE.

IT'S A **RUSH!**

NO WAY TO KNOW WHERE THE
SENSOR BUFFER BEGINS AND
ENDS, SO I LEAVE IT TO THE
LAST *POSSIBLE* MOMENT...



...TO POWER UP
AND GENERATE
THE *NULL FIELD*.



EVEN SO...

...IT'S A FAR FROM
GENTLE LANDING.



I FLIRT WITH *CRITICAL* SYSTEM-SHOCK,
DIPPING IN AND OUT OF CONSCIOUSNESS.

I TRY TO *FOCUS*...
ON THE *MISSION*,
ON THE *OBJECTIVE*,
BUT INSTEAD...



I SLIP...

...ALL THE WAY BACK TO THE SILICON STEPPES OF KI-ALETA.

MY FIRST TIME IN OVERALL CHARGE OF A TACTICAL UNIT, MY *ONE* FAILURE. I'VE RE-LIVED IT, IN GRINDING STOP-MOTION, A *THOUSAND* TIMES.

WELCOME TO ONE THOUSAND AND *ONE*...

DISTANCE?

A KIL, MAYBE. CONDITIONS ARE PLAYING MERRY HELL WITH INSTRUMENTATION.

GUESS THAT'S *WHY* NO ONE BOTHERS TO MONITOR THIS VECTOR.

YOU WOULDN'T GET A READING WORTH SPIT, AND BESIDES, NO ONE IN THEIR RIGHT *MIND* WOULD ATTEMPT A CROSSING.

EXCEPT US.

HOLD IT! I THINK...

YES.

GO TO VOICE-COMM. WE'RE *HERE*.

UNLESS I MISS MY GUESS, THIS IS THE OUTER PERIMETER...

...OF THE OMEGA BUNKER.

RIGHT. BORE
DRONES ONE AND
TWO ARE IN
POSITION. LET'S
GO TO WORK...

GIZMO?

I'LL HAVE THE **HOLOMATTER
PROJECTOR**
UP AND RUNNING IN JUST
A FEW NANO-KLIKS. STAND BY...

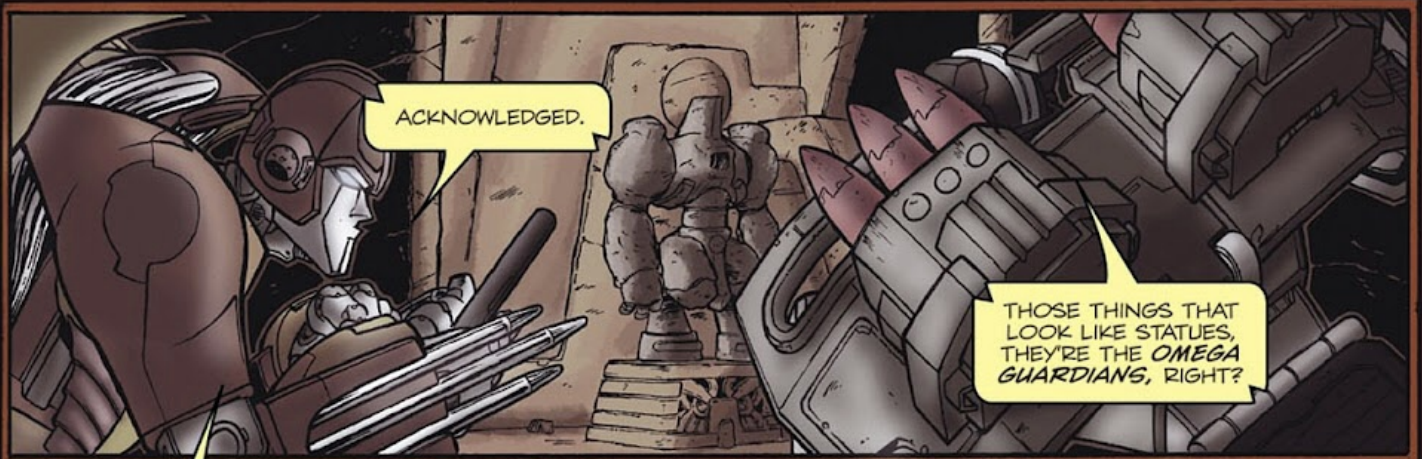
BACKBEAT?

SETTING LOW-
YIELD **CHARGES**.
TIMERS ARE SYNCH
WITH GIZMO'S
HOLOPROGRAM.

DEALER?

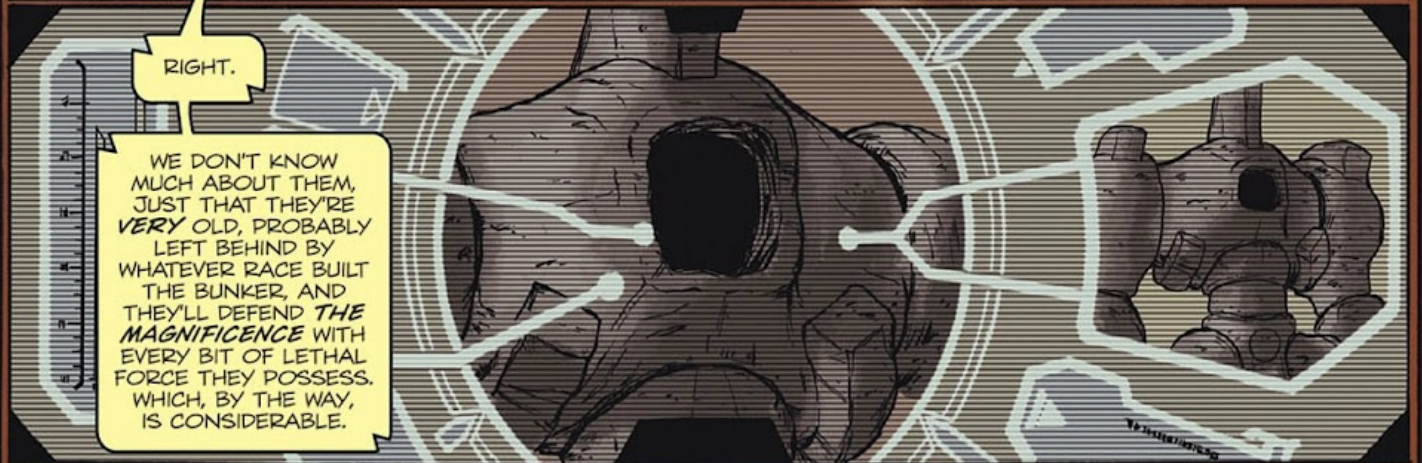
DROPSHIP
UPLINK ALIGNED
AND LOCKED.

HAVE BORE
DRONE THREE
LOCK ON TO MY
POSITION AND
BACKTRACK.



ACKNOWLEDGED.

THOSE THINGS THAT
LOOK LIKE STATUES,
THEY'RE THE *OMEGA*
GUARDIANS, RIGHT?



RIGHT.

WE DON'T KNOW
MUCH ABOUT THEM,
JUST THAT THEY'RE
VERY OLD, PROBABLY
LEFT BEHIND BY
WHATEVER RACE BUILT
THE BUNKER, AND
THEY'LL DEFEND *THE*
MAGNIFICENCE WITH
EVERY BIT OF LETHAL
FORCE THEY POSSESS.
WHICH, BY THE WAY,
IS CONSIDERABLE.



THE TRICK,
THEREFORE, IS TO
GET THIS DONE
CLEAN, IN AND
OUT WITHOUT A
FIREFIGHT.

OKAY...



...IT'S *SHOWTIME!*

I WAS SO FULL OF
ZEAL, GUNG-HO TO THE
MAX. I WONDER...

...IF THAT'S WHAT
GOT THEM *KILLED*.

SLOWLY, SURELY,
THE PAST RECEDES,
PRESENT—AND
PRESSING—
CONCERNS COMING
INTO FOCUS.





GETTING DOWN HERE, WAS—RELATIVELY SPEAKING—THE *EASY* PART. NOW...

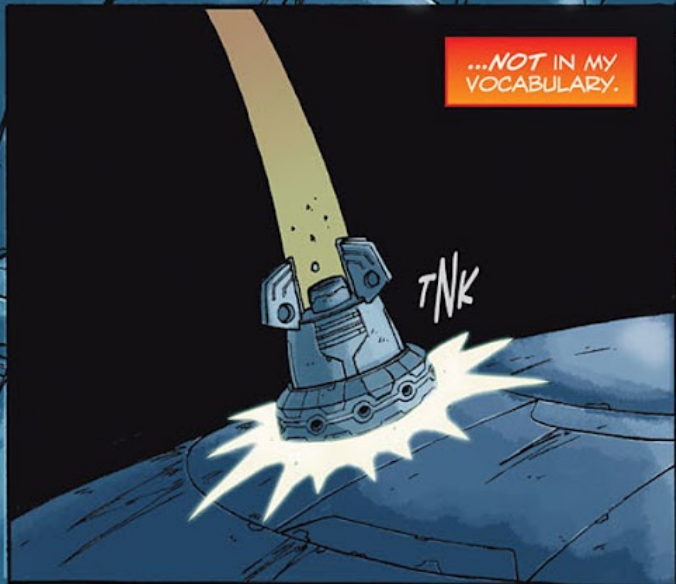
...I HAVE TO GET *IN*.

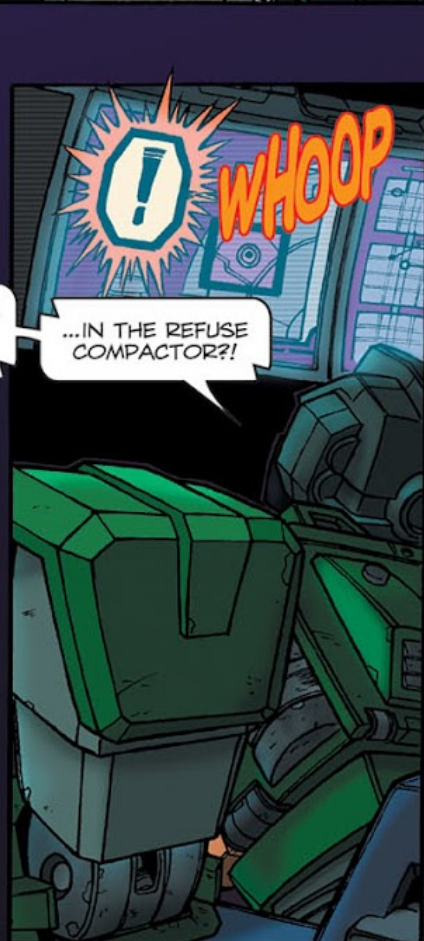
STYX. OF ALL THE DECEPTICON PENAL COLONIES, THIS IS THE HARSHTEST, THE MOST PUNISHING. LIFE EXPECTANCY IS *NOT* HIGH.



IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE *IMPREGNABLE*. WHICH, AS IT HAPPENS, IS JUST ONE OF MANY WORDS...

...*NOT* IN MY VOCABULARY.







...I MAKE MY MOVE!

THE INVASIVE PROGRAM
PROPAGATES AN
APPARENTLY RANDOM,
BUT IN REALITY
RIGOROUSLY *TIMED*
SEQUENCE OF "GHOST"
ALERTS AND SENSOR
BLACK SPOTS.



AND, AS GUARDS AND
TROUBLESHOOTERS
ARE PULLED THIS WAY
AND THAT, I...



...SLIP THROUGH
THE GAPS.



I COUNT
NANO-KLIK
INTERVALS...



MOVING NEARER
AND NEARER...

...TO CELLBLOCK
Z-LATERAL.



EVER CLOSER,
I HOPE...



...TO SOME SMALL MEASURE
OF REDEMPTION.

AS I WORK, I TRY TO PLACE
THE EXACT MOMENT...

...IT ALL WENT SO HORRIBLY WRONG ON KI-ALETA.

HOLOMATTER PROGRAM RUNNING. WE... ARE *IN* THE TUBE!

SOME OF US MORE LITERALLY THAN OTHERS.

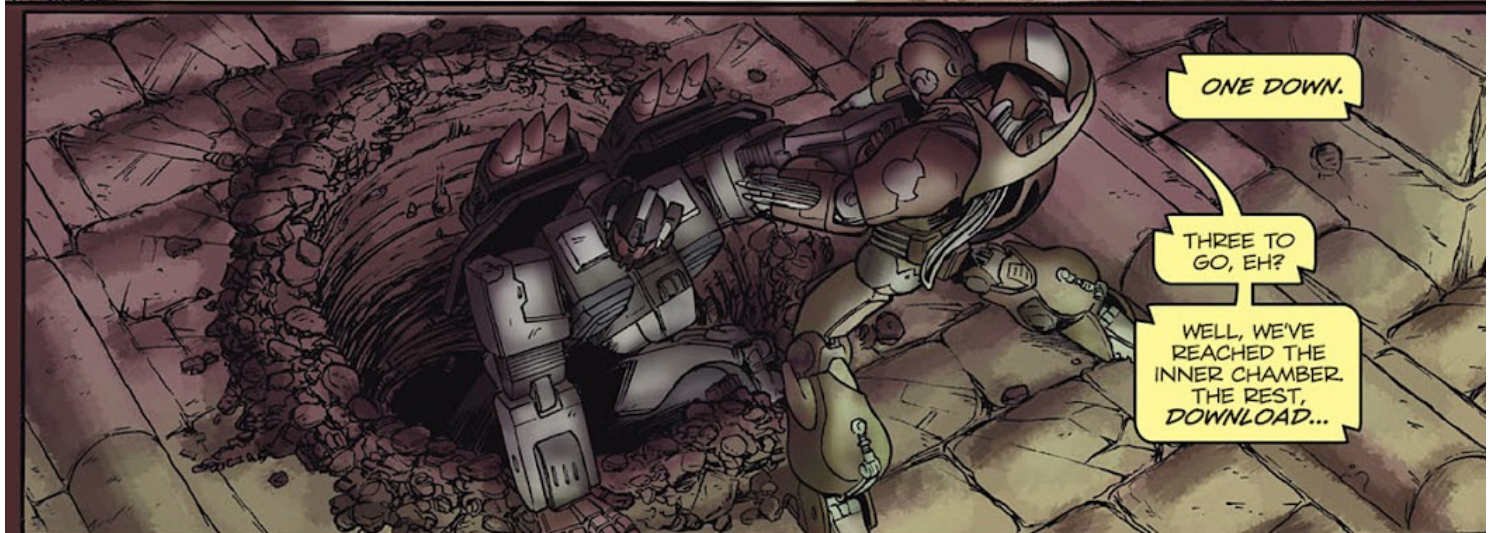
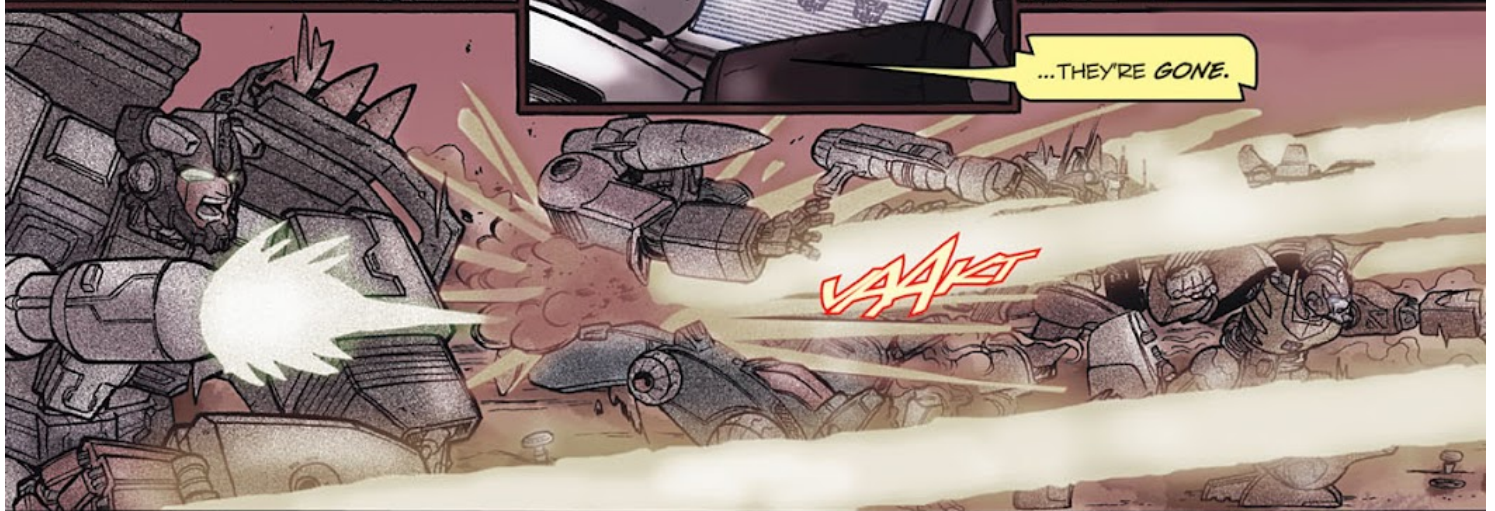
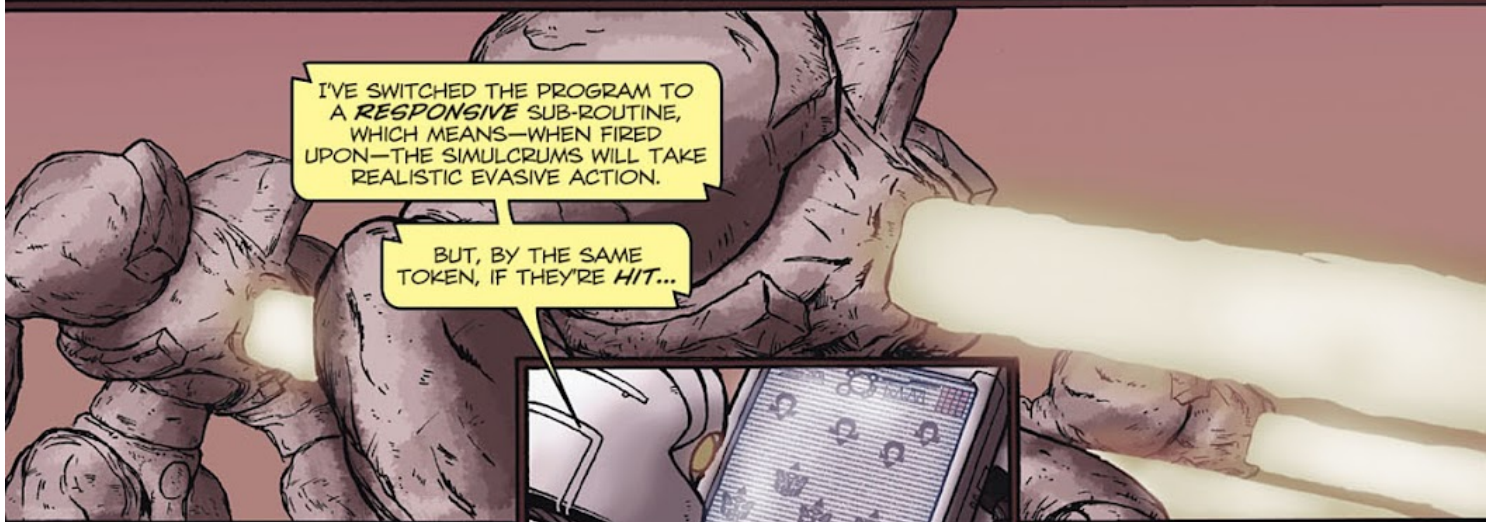
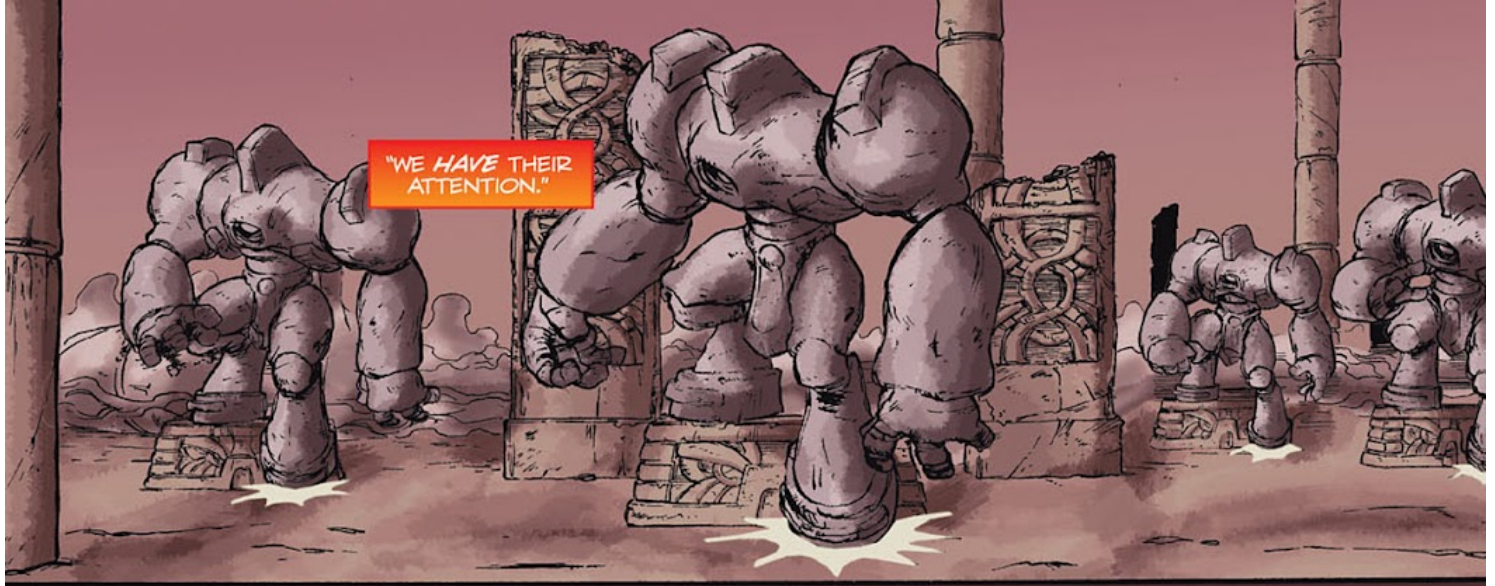
THE GUARDIANS?

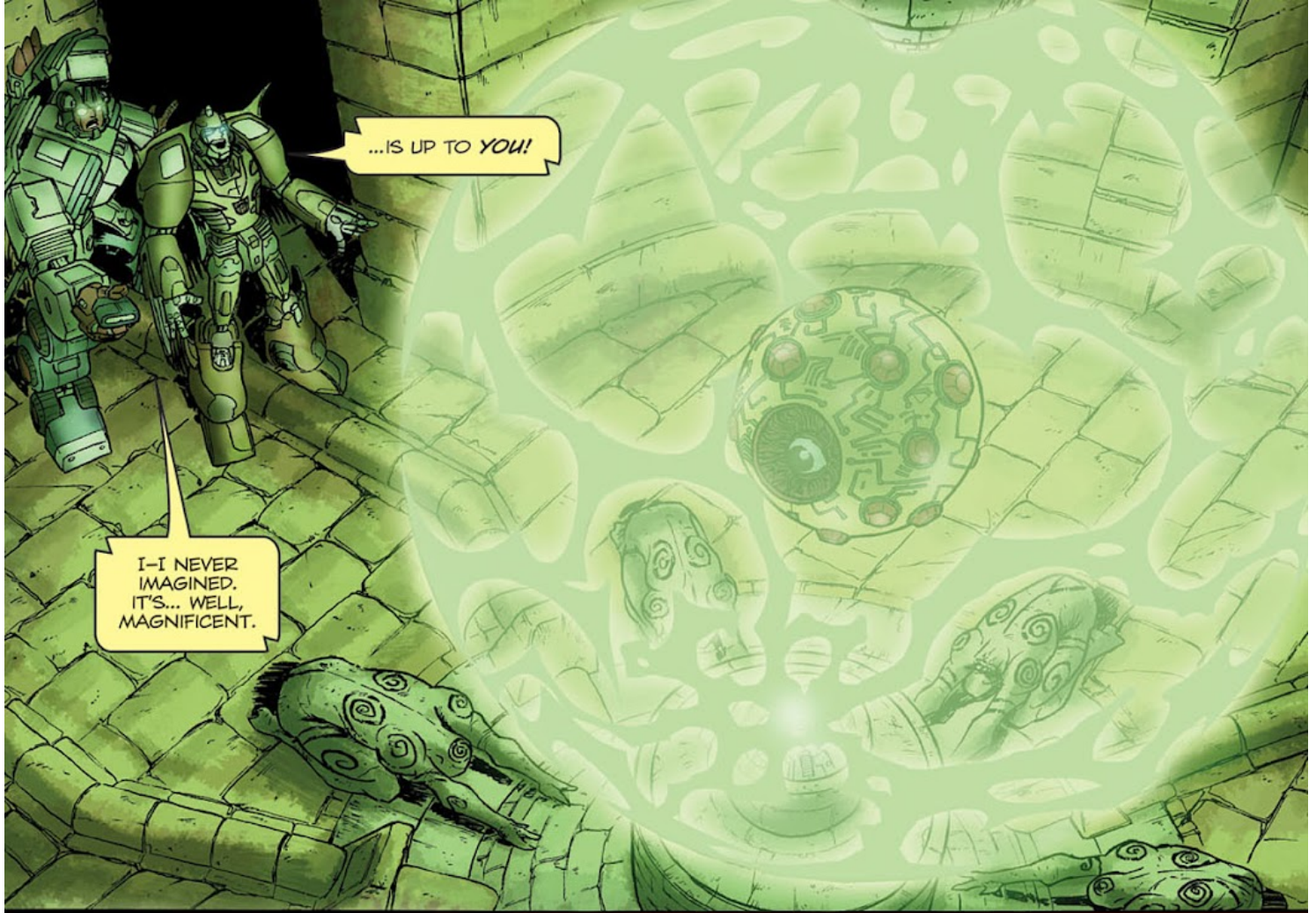
SO FAR SO UNMOVED. LET'S SEE WHAT HAPPENS WHEN, IN ADDITION TO SIMULCRUMS...

...WE THROW IN SOME FIREWORKS!

TUMP

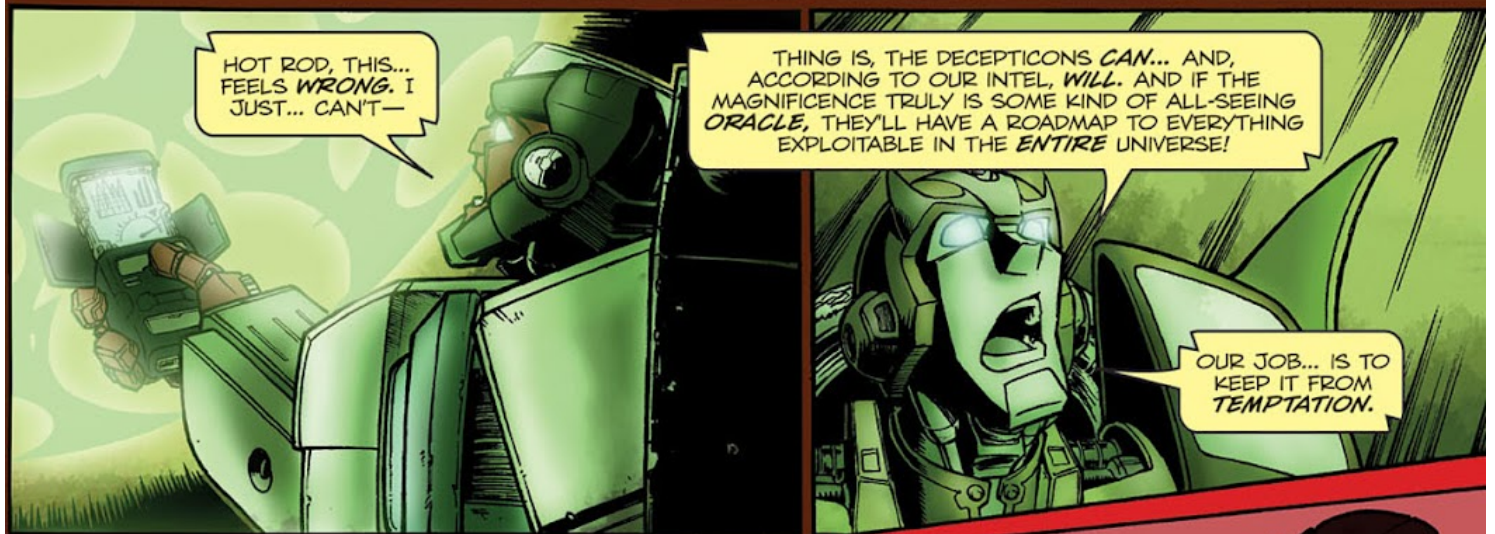
"AH-HAH!"





...IS UP TO YOU!

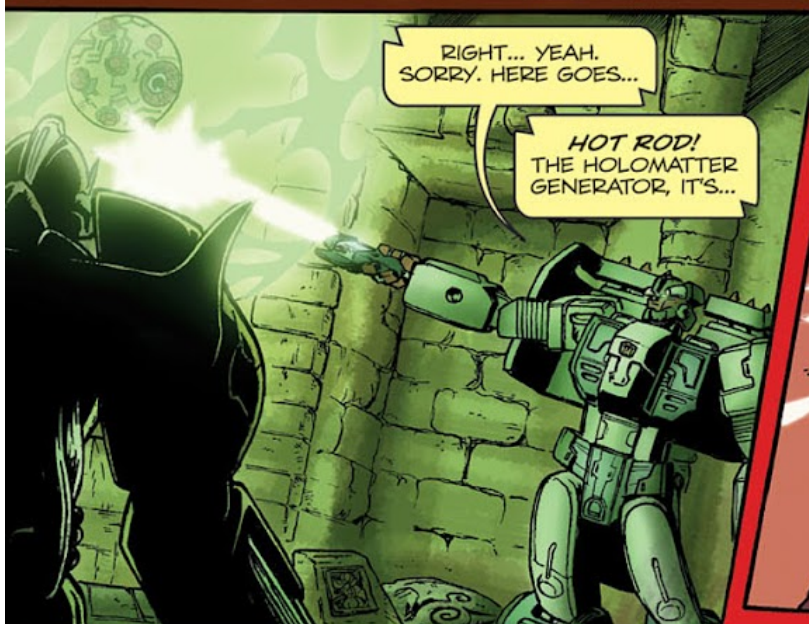
I-I NEVER
IMAGINED.
IT'S... WELL,
MAGNIFICENT.



HOT ROD, THIS...
FEELS *WRONG*. I
JUST... CAN'T—

THING IS, THE DECEPTICONS *CAN*... AND,
ACCORDING TO OUR INTEL, *WILL*. AND IF THE
MAGNIFICENCE TRULY IS SOME KIND OF ALL-SEEING
ORACLE, THEY'LL HAVE A ROADMAP TO EVERYTHING
EXPLOITABLE IN THE *ENTIRE* UNIVERSE!

OUR JOB... IS TO
KEEP IT FROM
TEMPTATION.



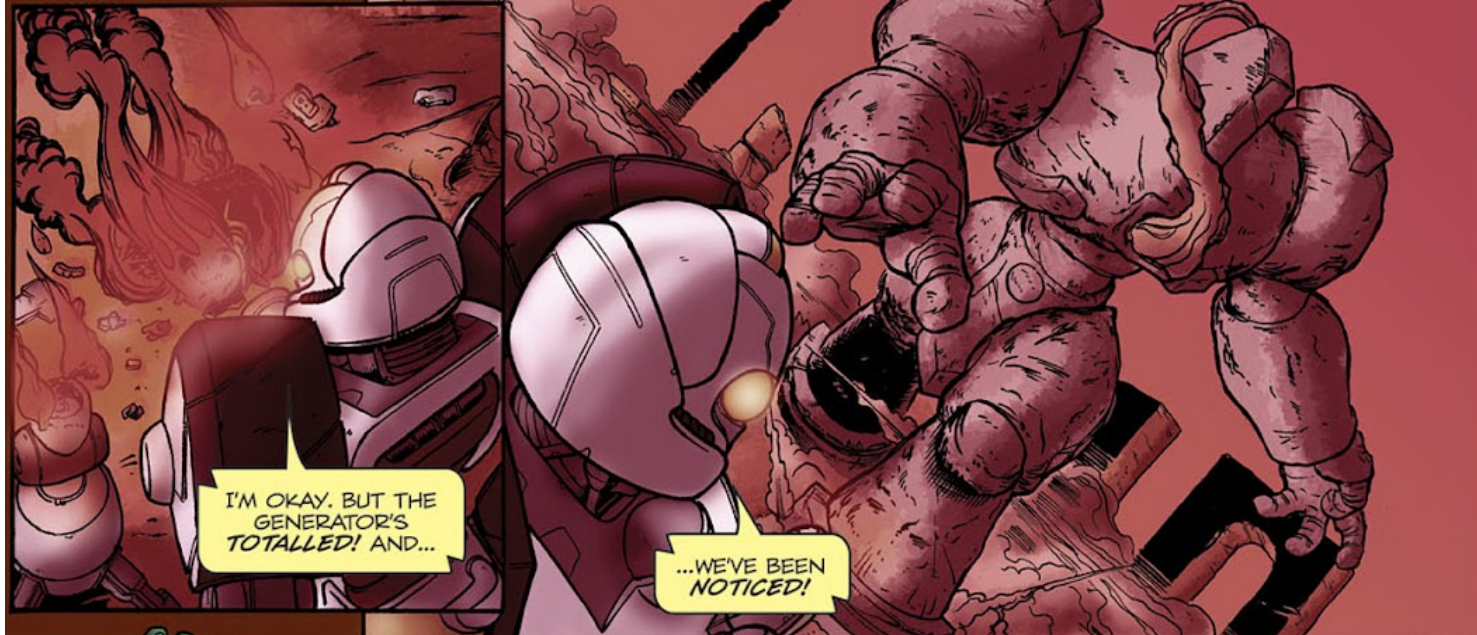
RIGHT... YEAH.
SORRY. HERE GOES...

HOT ROD!
THE HOLOMATTER
GENERATOR, IT'S...



THWON!

GIZMO?



WAWP!-WAWP!-WAWP!

...ARE MERCIFULLY DROWNED
OUT BY A CACOPHONY OF STYX
ALARM KLAXONS, AS-ON *CUE*...

...THE VIRUS POPS *EVERY* CELL DOOR
IN THE CONTAINMENT BLOCKS.

KIND OF ITS
LAST HURRAH.

STANDARD PROCEDURE, IN
SUCH AN EVENTUALITY...

THIS IS A
CODE-NINE. I
REPEAT...

...IS TO EVACUATE *ALL*
HIGH RANKING OFFICERS
TO A SECURE ORBITAL
RELAY PLATFORM.

I GUESS THEY FIGURE EVEN IF
THE PRISONERS GET OUT, THERE'S
NOWHERE FOR THEM TO GO.

SO *THE BRASS* JUST
GETS OUT OF HARM'S
WAY AND WAITS FOR A
CLEAN-UP SQUAD.

IT'S MY *TICKET*
OUT OF HERE!



Z-LATERAL IS QUIET, THE
OCCUPANTS EITHER UNAWARE
IT'S ANYTHING MORE THAN A
ROUTINE SPOT-INSPECTION...

...OR JUST TOO WEAK
OR BROKEN TO TAKE
ADVANTAGE.



I TRY NOT TO THINK
OF WHO'S *IN* THESE
CAGES, WHO *ELSE* I
COULD MAYBE SAVE.

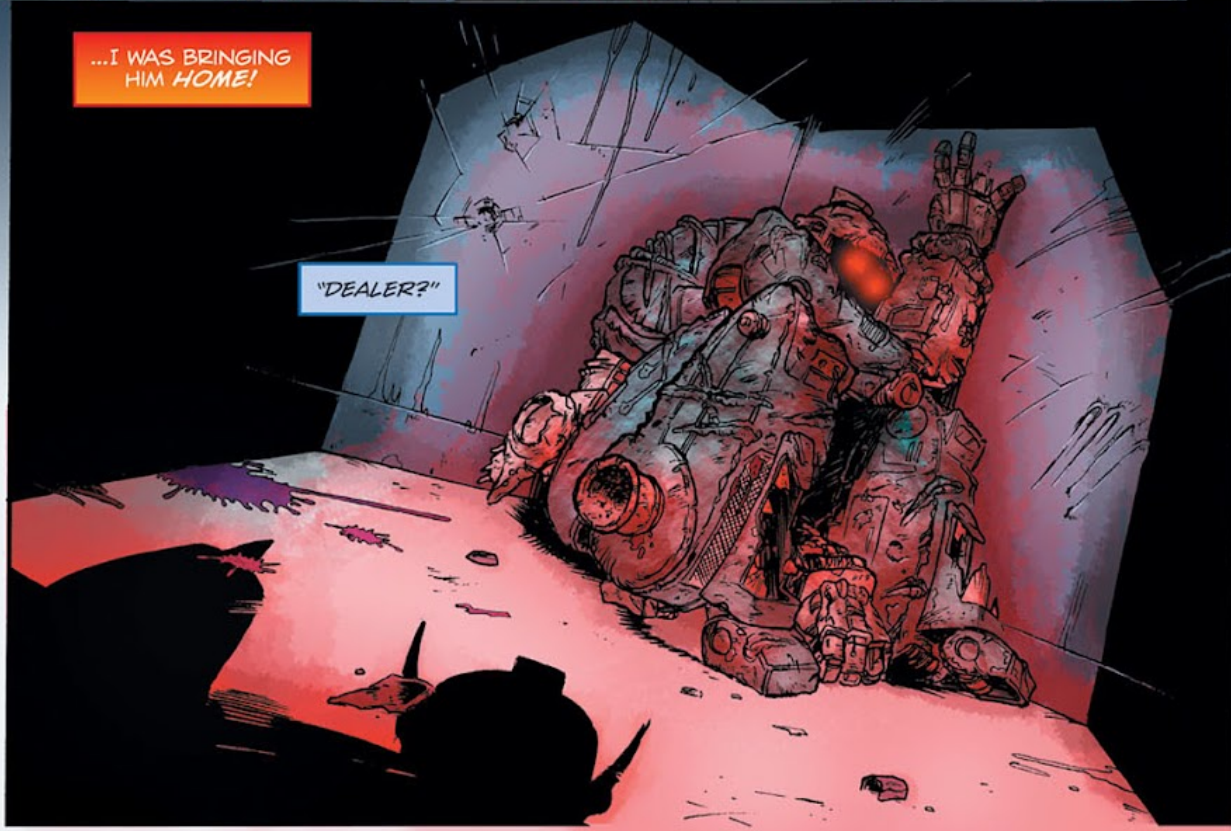


INSTEAD, I FOCUS ON *HIM*. WHEN WORD FIRST REACHED ME THAT
HE WAS STILL ALIVE, A *CAPTIVE* IN THIS HELLHOLE, EVERY
RESOURCE I COULD TAP WAS POURED INTO THIS ONE OPERATION.

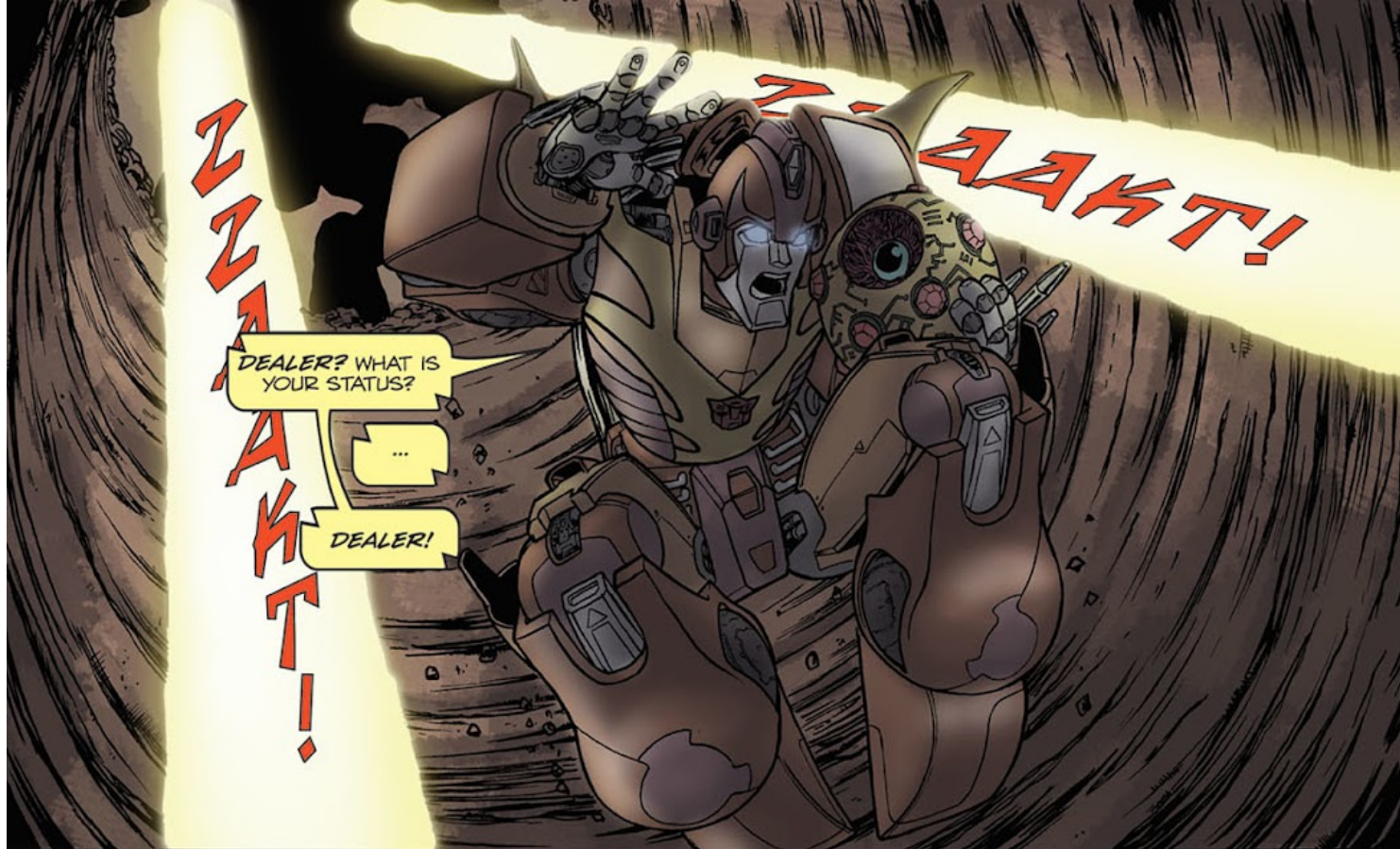


I'D LEFT HIM BEHIND,
ABANDONED HIM ON KI-ALETA.
THIS TIME, NO MATTER WHAT...

...I WAS BRINGING
HIM *HOME*!



"DEALER?"



DEALER? WHAT IS YOUR STATUS?

...

DEALER!



I HAVE THE OBJECTIVE. IF YOU'RE ABLE, GET YOURSELF OUT OF THERE—NOW!

H-HOT ROD?
HOT ROD!



I'M PINNED DOWN!
DECEPTICONS... AN
ATTACK SQUAD... BEFORE
I KNEW IT, THEY WERE
RIGHT ON TOP OF ME!
HOT ROD...

...HELP!



I'M SORRY...

DEALER... I...

...CAN'T...

I HAD MY OWN, "OPTICS-
ONLY" ORDERS, ORDERS
THE OTHERS KNEW
NOTHING ABOUT...

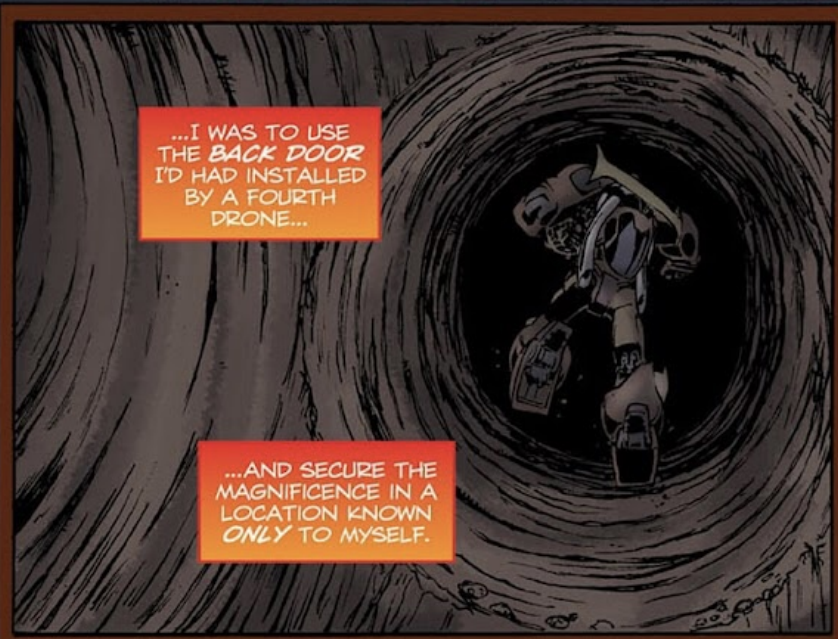


...AND I FOLLOWED THEM TO THE LETTER.

DEALER, IT'S ME-HOT ROD! I'M GETTING YOU OUT OF HERE!

HT-RD?

THE MISSION OBJECTIVE TOOK **PRIORITY...** OVER PRETTY MUCH EVERYTHING. IF THE EXIT STRATEGY WAS IN ANY WAY COMPROMISED...



...I WAS TO USE THE **BACK DOOR** I'D HAD INSTALLED BY A FOURTH DRONE...

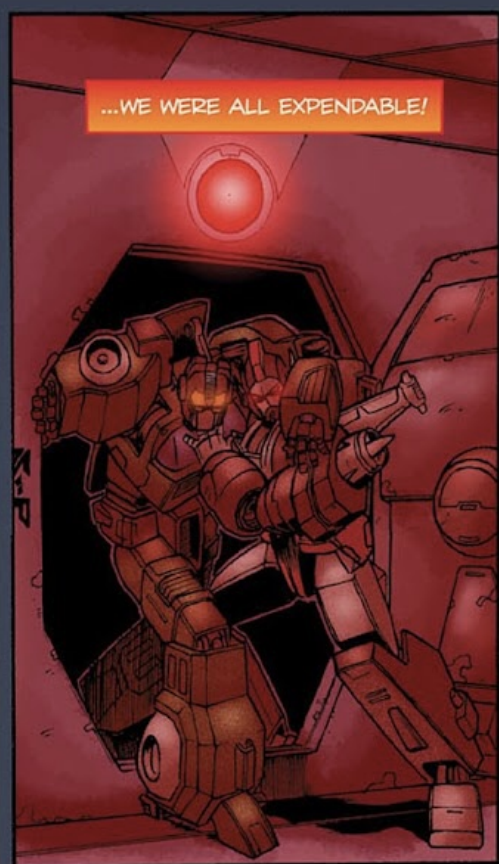
...AND SECURE THE MAGNIFICENCE IN A LOCATION KNOWN **ONLY** TO MYSELF.



HOLD STILL NOW...



ULTIMATELY...



...WE WERE ALL EXPENDABLE!

THE OFFICIAL *INCIDENT INVESTIGATION REPORT* PUT THE BLAME FIRMLY ON AN UNSECURED COMM. CHANNEL AND A DEFECTIVE HOLOMATTER POWER CELL.

BUT IT WAS MY RESPONSIBILITY TO DOUBLE-CHECK THE MISSION ORDNANCE AND SECURITY INTERLOCKS.

THOUGH NOBODY EVER ACTUALLY POINTED THE FINGER...

WAIT HERE...

...THE BUCK STOPPED WITH *ME*.

WHAT THE FR—

SURPRISE!

BOOM!



AND IF I THOUGHT THAT,
SO MUST HAVE OTHERS.

EVERY TIME SINCE, WHENEVER I'VE
HEADED UP A TACTICAL RESPONSE
OR FIELD UNIT, I'VE WONDERED...

...DO THEY *TRUST* ME?



DO I TRUST *MYSELF*?



THAT'S WHY, IF IT'S AN
OPTION, I PREFER TO GO
SOLO. IF I MESS UP, IT'S ME
PAYS THE PRICE. JUST ME.

BUT IT GETS
LONELY-OUT HERE.



MAYBE, JUST MAYBE...



...I'VE FOUND A
WAY BACK.



DEALER'S *OUT* OF IT FOR THE WHOLE
RETURN JOURNEY. IT ISN'T UNTIL
NEARLY A DECA-CYCLE LATER...

...THAT I GET TO
SAY MY PIECE.

UM...

I'M,
WELL....

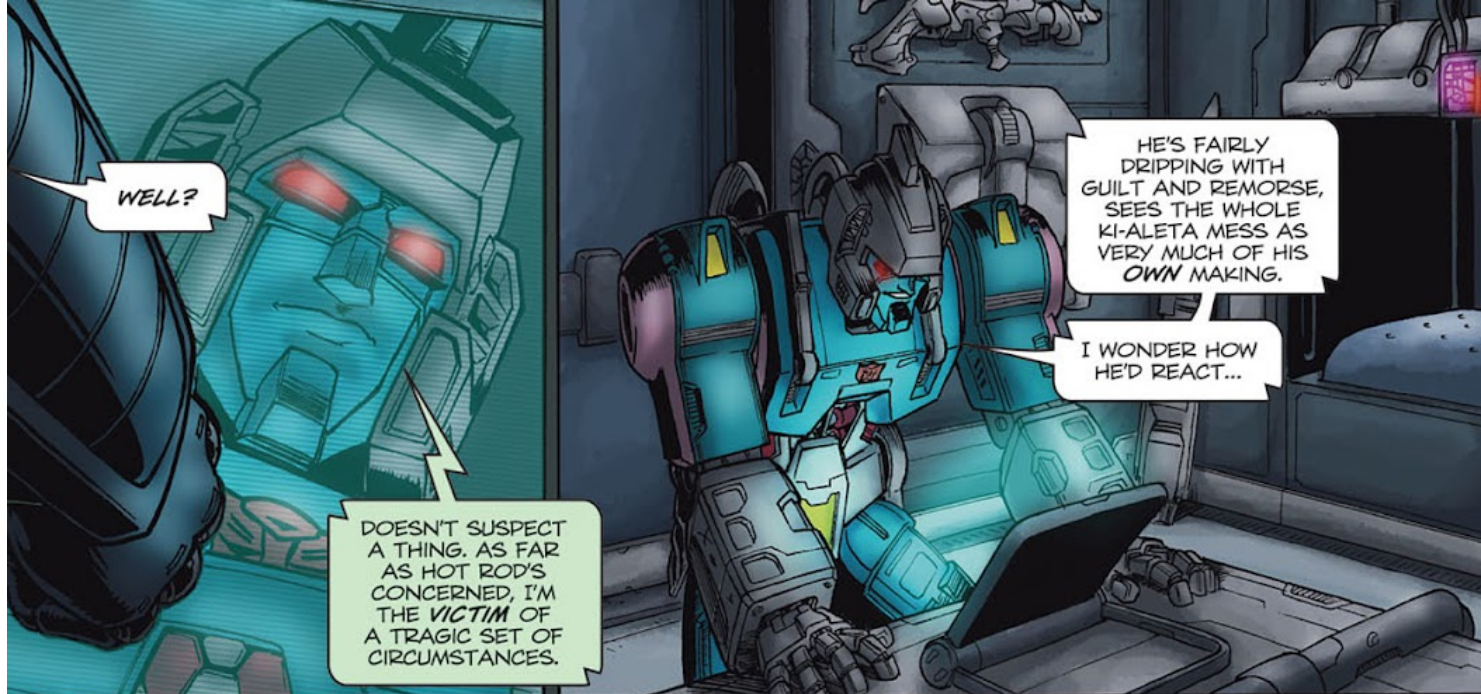
YOU
SEE...

HOT
ROD...

...IT'S *ALRIGHT*.
REALLY. IN YOUR
POSITION... I'D HAVE
DONE THE EXACT
SAME THING.

THANK YOU FOR
COMING *BACK* FOR ME,
FOR RISKING SO MUCH. IT
MEANS, WELL, EVERYTHING.
WHAT I'D LIKE, MORE
THAN ANYTHING...

...IS FOR US TO
BE *FRIENDS*!

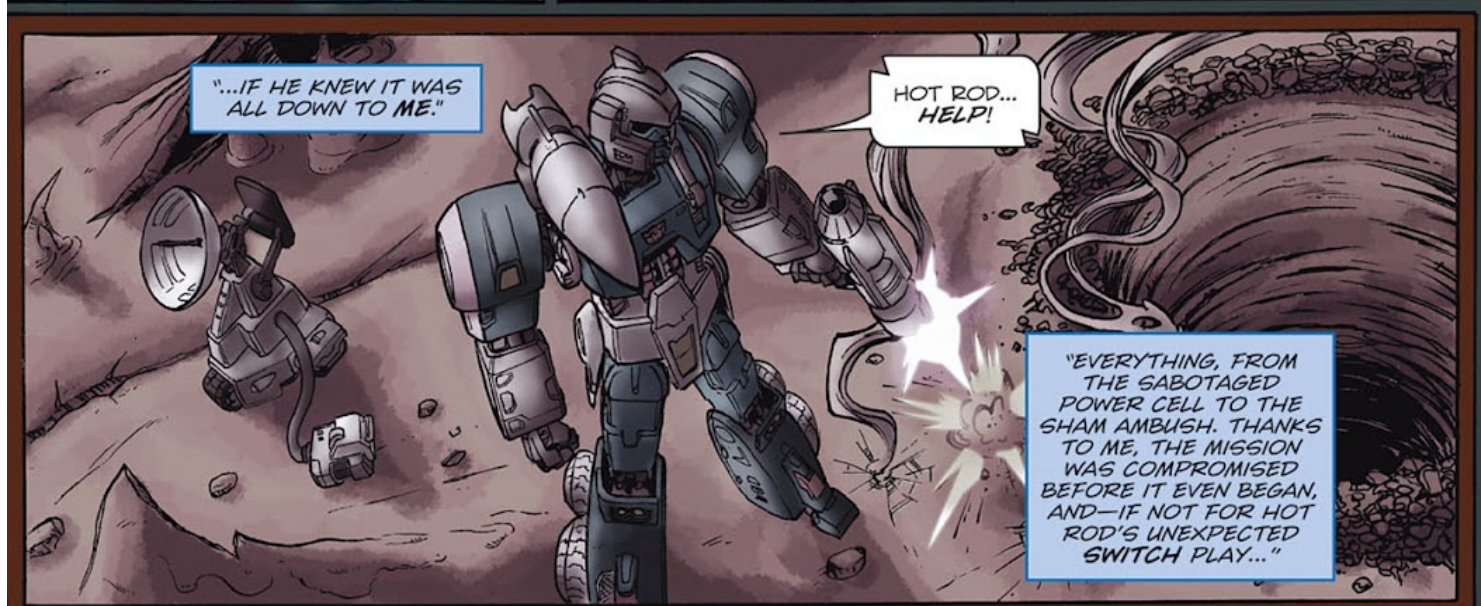


WELL?

DOESN'T SUSPECT A THING. AS FAR AS HOT ROD'S CONCERNED, I'M THE VICTIM OF A TRAGIC SET OF CIRCUMSTANCES.

HE'S FAIRLY DRIPPING WITH GUILT AND REMORSE, SEES THE WHOLE KI-ALETA MESS AS VERY MUCH OF HIS OWN MAKING.

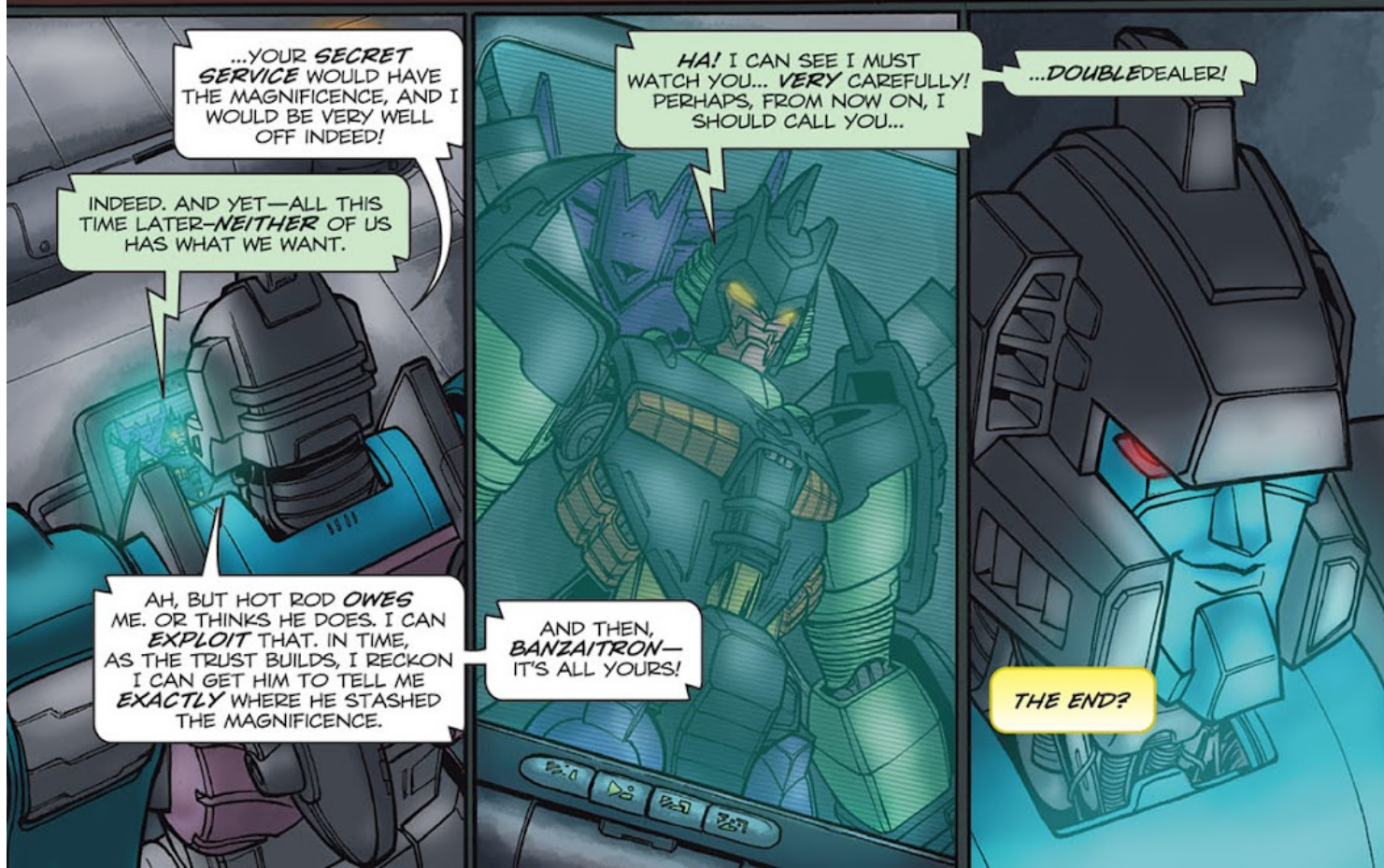
I WONDER HOW HE'D REACT...



"...IF HE KNEW IT WAS ALL DOWN TO ME."

HOT ROD...
HELP!

"EVERYTHING, FROM THE SABOTAGED POWER CELL TO THE SHAM AMBUSH. THANKS TO ME, THE MISSION WAS COMPROMISED BEFORE IT EVEN BEGAN, AND—IF NOT FOR HOT ROD'S UNEXPECTED SWITCH PLAY..."



...YOUR **SECRET SERVICE** WOULD HAVE THE MAGNIFICENCE, AND I WOULD BE VERY WELL OFF INDEED!

INDEED. AND YET—ALL THIS TIME LATER—NEITHER OF US HAS WHAT WE WANT.

AH, BUT HOT ROD **OWES** ME. OR THINKS HE DOES. I CAN **EXPLOIT** THAT. IN TIME, AS THE TRUST BUILDS, I RECKON I CAN GET HIM TO TELL ME **EXACTLY** WHERE HE STASHED THE MAGNIFICENCE.

HA! I CAN SEE I MUST WATCH YOU... **VERY CAREFULLY!** PERHAPS, FROM NOW ON, I SHOULD CALL YOU...

AND THEN, **BANZAITRON**—IT'S ALL YOURS!

...**DOUBLEDEALER!**

THE END?